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RUSSIA: Fresh raids on moderate Turkish Muslim theologian readers

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Officials from regional public prosecutors' offices and the FSB security service searched homes of Said Nursi readers across Russia over the weekend of 8-9 December, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. The raids follow a ban on some works by the moderate Turkish Muslim theologian. The flat of Marat Tamimdarov, Russian translator of a number of Nursi's works, was one place searched. The search warrant claimed that Nurdzhular (a russification of the Turkish for "Nursi followers") is an organisation banned in Turkey and not registered in Russia. Tamimdarov denied this, insisting to Forum 18 that there is no such organisation and that "it isn't true that there's a ban in Turkey – there was even a symposium on Nursi there recently, attended by international scholars. There isn't a drop of extremism in his works." Akhmed Makhmedov of the Volga Spiritual Directorate of Muslims told Forum 18 that "we don't approve of the practice of having secular academics label theological works extremist – that can be done with any holy book." As a "bad precedent" he singled out a petition calling for a ban on all Jewish religious and national organisations in Russia, on the basis of allegedly extremist sentiments in a sixteenth-century Jewish law code. Makhmedov also criticised the ban on Said Nursi's works as "against common sense".

Officials from regional public prosecutor's offices and the FSB security service searched homes of Said Nursi readers across Russia over the weekend of 8-9 December, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. These are the first such raids since a number of works by the moderate Turkish Muslim theologian were banned by a Moscow court earlier in 2007 (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

In one instance, people claiming to be neighbours asked to check whether flooding from the floor above had affected the Naberezhnyye Chelny (Tatarstan Republic) apartment of Marat Tamimdarov, the translator into Russian of a number of Nursi's works told Forum 18 on 12 December. The Tamimdarovs did not admit the purported neighbours as there was no water damage to their apartment and, at 08.00 am on the morning of Sunday 9 December, they did not want to wake their two young daughters. Ten minutes later, however, people claiming to be the fire brigade demanded entry. Suspecting this to be a hoax by burglars, Tamimdarov continued, he did not respond until he heard the iron front door of the family apartment being sawn off its hinges. Six representatives of Naberezhnyye Chelny Public Prosecutor's Office and the FSB security service then explained that they had not revealed their identity earlier, as they were concerned the Tamimdarovs would not let them in.

"I asked why they didn't tell us straight away, especially as they had a search warrant," Tamimdarov remarked to Forum 18. "I told them we would have opened the door, we've nothing illegal here." Russian translations of works by Said Nursi were taken from the Tamimdarovs' apartment during a raid on 12 July 2005, before the 2007 ban, he explained. Asked by the law enforcement representatives if there were any banned Nursi books in the apartment, Tamimdarov replied that he still had two Nursi works in Turkish - and therefore legal - as well as a Russian-language tract on nature not among the titles banned by Moscow's Koptevo District Court. The law enforcement representatives confiscated these as well as his computer hard drive, the translator told Forum 18. Tamimdarov stressed that – aside from their forced entry - the state representatives were polite and apologetic throughout. "They said it wasn't their fault, that they were just following orders. They weren't at all rough."

Marat Tamimdarov read to Forum 18 the 6 December warrant for the search of his apartment, signed by Judge Marsel Akhmetshin of Kazan's Vakhitovo District Court. This maintained that he "conducts work leading a network of Nurdzhular madrassahs, lures new adepts into the sect, translates and distributes Nursi literature." It also claimed that Nurdzhular is an organisation banned in Turkey and not registered in Russia. Simply a russification of "Nurcular", Turkish for "Nursi followers", "there is no such organisation as Nurdzhular," Tamimdarov insisted to Forum 18. "People who read Pushkin might be called Pushkinists, but there's no organisation. And it isn't true that there's a ban in Turkey – there was even a symposium on Nursi there recently, attended by international scholars. There isn't a drop of extremism in his works."

According to Tamimdarov, the law enforcement representatives also wanted to interrogate him at Naberezhnyye Chelny Public Prosecutor's Office, but he refused to go or answer questions without a lawyer present. He now has five days in which to comply with their request. While Tamimdarov's wife also refused to visit the Public Prosecutor's Office, she did answer questions and have her fingerprints taken during the apartment search. "She's very concerned. She said to me, 'What if you're arrested? When we have

two small children?" Marat Tamimdarov remarked to Forum 18. "Please pray for us."

Contacted at Tatarstan's Public Prosecutor's Office on 12 December, Vladimir Yashin, who recently took over investigation of the Nursi case, would confirm only that the searches took place in a number of Russian regions in addition to his republic. He directed Forum 18 to the Investigation Department's press secretary, Eduard Abdullin.

Eduard Abdullin explained to Forum 18 that, since "the whole issue is quite closed (...) secret, out of consideration for the investigator's own interests," he was unable to say anything more than the regional Public Prosecutor's 11 December press release. This announced that over the previous weekend, in connection with the re-opening on 3 December 2007 of a criminal case into extremist activity, public prosecution and FSB officials conducted a number of searches of homes and administrative buildings. The press release stated that these were believed to belong to members of the organisation "Nurdzhular". In addition to tens of other Russian cities, simultaneous searches took place in the Tatar cities of Kazan, Naberezhnyye Chelny and Nizhnekamsk, it stated, during the course of which several examples of literature from the collected works of Nursi and firearms were seized.

The press release also noted that an earlier, aborted criminal investigation established that a number of unidentified persons belonging to the "Nurdzhular" organisation operated inside and outside Tatarstan without legal registration on Russian territory. Members "formed illegal madrassahs in private apartments for the purpose of study, into which citizens of Russia attending courses at mosques, acquaintances, relatives, neighbours and others were lured. The ideas of the founder of its doctrine, S. Nursi, were taught at the madrassahs. Members of the aforementioned organisation also travelled around cities of Tatarstan and the Russian Federation, where they publicly propagandised the same ideas in courses or during preaching. According to received information, the activity of members of the religious-nationalist sect 'Nurdzhular' is banned in Turkey, as is the distribution of books, brochures and ideas by S. Nursi."

There is no legal registration requirement for religious or social associations in Russia, Forum 18 notes.

Also on the morning of Sunday, 9 December, public prosecution officials, FSB and police searched the Kazan office of Prisma cultural-educational foundation, Islam.ru website reported on 11 December. After presenting a search warrant, state representatives demanded that unspecified "extremist literature" be given up voluntarily. According to foundation employees, books in Turkish and Russian by the Turkish theologian Fethullah Gulen and others on Islam published by Prisma calling for charity and tolerance towards other faiths were seized, as well as employees' personal notes, CDs and DVDs containing personal data and a computer hard drive.

Marat Tamimdarov, the Nursi translator, told Forum 18 he knew of analogous searches in Makhachkala (Dagestan Republic) and the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

Despite interrogation of teachers and regional Education Ministry officials, public prosecution officials failed to find banned works by Said Nursi during earlier searches of Turkish lycees in Tatarstan, Zvezda Povolzhya newspaper reported on 19 October. "Things became ridiculous," the local newspaper maintained. "They demanded that physics, maths and chemistry lessons in English be stopped, Oxford textbooks and even Russian translations be withdrawn on the grounds that they contain 'Islamic ideology'."

In fact many, if not most, students at Tatarstan's Turkish lycees "don't even know who Nursi is," according to the imam-khatib of Kazan's Bulgar Mosque and head of the Propaganda and Youth Department of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Tatarstan. Unconnected with Nursi, education at the Turkish lycees in Kazan, Naberezhnyye Chelny and Nizhnekamsk is of a European standard and mostly in English, Ildus Faizov told Forum 18 on 20 November: "The students there are morally very pure, intelligent, well adapted to the modern world and capable of serving the good of our country." All the directors and teachers at the lycees are by now Tatar, he added.

Faizov thought that Public Prosecutor's Office searches of the lycees were part of routine check-ups in late September and early October. "They even searched the madrassahs and our mosque," he told Forum 18. As at the lycees, however, no Nursi literature was found. "We never had that literature, and now it isn't allowed. We didn't see a need for it – some people read it in the 1990s maybe, but I can't say it would stir the souls of our Muslims here. And there are so many books now."

Confirming to Forum 18 that public prosecution officials and police have warned his Spiritual Directorate and the Turkish lycees not to harbour Nursi literature, Faizov was at a loss to explain why the authorities should focus upon this particular Muslim theologian. "Maybe just in case – this is Russia after all. When Tsar Nicholas I issued a decree to support the intelligentsia for the good of Russia, the Interior Ministry responded by issuing a decree on support for the intelligentsia. The regional governors ordered the identification of anyone who could write or paint. In the districts they ordered the arrest of anyone who could write or paint and send them to Siberia. That's how it happens here."

A ban on the Russian translations of Risale-i-Nur (Messages of Light), Said Nursi's fourteen-part commentary on the Koran and Islam more broadly, came into force on 18 September 2007, when Moscow City Court upheld a corresponding 21 May 2007 decision by Moscow's Koptevo District Court. Anyone popularising the contents of the work could now be imprisoned for up to five years under Article 282 of the Criminal Code. Russia's Human Rights Ombudsman denounced the case even before the verdict,

warning that "it is very important that we do not allow interference in the convictions and beliefs of millions of citizens on the poorly grounded, unproven pretext of fighting against extremism" (see F18News 27 June 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=981).

Over the two years prior to the ban, Nursi followers in Tatarstan – particularly a group of women in Naberezhnyye Chelny – were subjected to raids, searches, book confiscations, forced psychiatric evaluations and an attempt to launch a criminal prosecution (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=992). Representatives of the local law enforcement agencies have both defended their actions to Forum 18 and denied the women's allegations of abuse (see F18News 11 July 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=991).

From a Sufi family, Turkish theologian Said Nursi (1876-1960) attempted to integrate Islamic and modern scientific thought. Known particularly for his biting opposition to the social consequences of atheist ideology, he once wrote to the Vatican suggesting that Muslims and Christians should join forces against it. Inevitably at odds with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's rigidly secularist regime, Nursi spent many years in internal exile and prison. Today, however, his works are freely available in Turkey, where his followers - known in Turkish as "Nurcular" - operate their own foundations and mosques.

In separate developments in the Volga city of Samara, district public prosecution officials issued a formal warning to the imam and muezzin of the city's historical mosque for distributing a brochure called "The Navruz Festival and Islamic Doctrine" at Friday prayers, the website of Samara Regional Public Prosecutor's Office reported on 26 October. The warning followed a 23 October Public Prosecutor's Office check-up on the mosque.

"The Navruz Festival and Islamic Doctrine", the Public Prosecutor's Office website notes, has been recognised by anthropologists at Bashkortostan Republic's branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences as "contributing to a radicalisation of consciousness within a section of Muslim society, the formation among Muslims of a negative attitude towards those practising ethno-cultural traditions." The aim of the work, the academics reportedly maintained, "is to antagonise Islamic and non-Islamic cultural traditions, to divide society along religious lines. Distribution of the brochure may fuel incitement of interethnic and interreligious hatred."

The Saratov-based Volga Spiritual Directorate of Muslims is not familiar with "The Navruz Festival and Islamic Doctrine", its press secretary Akhmed Makhmedov told Forum 18 on 26 November. "If the brochure called for action against people who celebrate Navruz, then the public prosecutor was right to issue the warning. But if it is just an innocent text explaining the essence of the Navruz festival and the Islamic view of it then there is no reason for such action."

Navruz is an ancient new year festival, celebrated as a holy day under a variety of names by Zoroastrians, adherents of Sufi Islam, Alawites (a branch of Shi'ite Islam), and Nizari Ismaili Muslims. Baha'is celebrate the day as the start of the faith's new year, called Naw-ruz. It is held over the spring equinox and is widely celebrated by many peoples, especially those of Turkic and Persian origin, in Iran, Iraq, Central Asia and throughout the world.

In general, Akhmed Makhmedov of the Volga Spiritual Directorate of Muslims told Forum 18, "we don't approve of the practice of having secular academics label theological works extremist – that can be done with any holy book." As a "bad precedent" he singled out the January 2005 petition whose 500 signatories called for a ban on all Jewish religious and national organisations in Russia, on the basis of allegedly extremist sentiments in the sixteenth-century Shulkhan Arukh Jewish law code. Makhmedov also criticised the ban on Said Nursi's works as "against common sense".

Academic analyses of theological texts have been key to prosecutions of alleged Islamic extremists in a number of recent trials (see F18News 8 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004).

The head of Bashkortostan FSB's counterintelligence unit believes that the republic and other Russian Muslim regions are now "an arena in the struggle for division of sphere of influence between the intelligence agencies of the West and a number of Islamic countries," Interfax Russian news agency reported on 7 December. According to Rustem Ibragimov, representatives of Islamic states are trying to establish "direct informal contact with citizens, to lure them into active socio-religious and propagandist activity in their own interests." In Turkish lycees in Bashkortostan, he maintained, young people have been given "quite specific ideological vaccinations". (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkey can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=68>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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